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Defector's reversal stirs questions on CIA procedures

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WASHINGTON — The essential mystery of whether KGB defector Vitaly Yurchenko was a double-agent or simply a homesick Russian may never be resolved.

But his first and last public words in this country invite a more readily addressable question: If he was a bona fide defector, was he properly handled by the Central Intelligence Agency?

Opening his sensational press conference last Monday, Mr. Yurchenko complained of his treatment. Leaving the country Wednesday, he said how much he had missed his family and his homeland.

There is no question that, double-agent or not, Mr. Yurchenko is now being used as a disseminator of misinformation for the Kremlin. Scant credence is given on Capitol Hill or in the intelligence community to his complaints of being abducted, drugged and otherwise maltreated.

But there is more interest in how he was handled on a personal level by his CIA controllers: Did they compound the defector's inevitable sense of isolation and self-doubt with unnecessary cultural privation by speaking mainly English rather than his native Russian to him, and did they misunderstand how deeply he was affected by the reported break-up of an affair he was having with the wife of a Soviet diplomat in Canada or by the problems his 16-year-old son was encountering in the Soviet Union?

"Defection is possibly the most traumatic experience that any normal person experiences in his lifetime. Social psychologists say there are a few traumatic experiences in life: losing a spouse, being divorced, the death of a child, moving one's home," according to Roy Godson, professor of government at Georgetown University and a specialist in intelligence activities.

He added: "A defector experiences almost all of these. Almost all defectors have periods of great personal difficulty in adjusting. You abandon your family. You abandon your country. You abandon your culture. If you were to ask me to torture somebody, that's what I would do to them."

Mr. Godson speculated that Mr. Yurchenko was suffering "postpartum blues," but pointedly did not rule out the possibility that he was a double-agent all along.

The CIA's normal response to such well-documented stress is to make the defector as physically comfortable as possible. Says one intelligence expert: "They don't live on the government per diem, which is low."

In handling defectors, there are four definable stages: an initial attempt to persuade the defector to stay "in place" where he or she is likely to be of continuing use; the establishment of bona fides; the debriefing period, and final assimilation into the population at large.

Each of these stages, according to Mr. Godson, has its own ethic.

In trying to keep the agent in place, the CIA case-handler will first establish whether the defection is for political or financial reasons. If it is political, he will tell the defector he can best undermine the system by staying where he is. If it is financial, he will offer whatever money the defector's services are judged to be worth.

The next step is to establish the defector's bona fides. This is accomplished through checking the details of his story, establishing that the information he is providing is in line with his rank, asking him questions to which the answers are known to check on his validity, and submitting him to polygraph tests.

Based on what is publicly known of Mr. Yurchenko's case, he passed the polygraph tests and provided information that was of value but, in the opinion of some intelligence experts, was hardly of the grade-A level one might expect from the No. 2 man in the KGB's North American directorate. President Reagan himself described the information as "not anything new or sensational." The CIA, of course, may have obtained more information than has been revealed.

Presumably the checks that the CIA ran on Mr. Yurchenko's information confirmed its accuracy.

Whatever his bona fides, the central issue, for the moment, remains how he was handled during his debriefing. President Reagan carefully has not ruled out the possibility that the Yurchenko case was part of a Kremlin "ploy," but the State Department has suggested his turnabout apparently was due to personal reasons. These reportedly involved his son and his former mistress.

"Normally speaking, [problems with] wives and mistresses are more easily rationalized [by defectors] than problems with children," said Donald Jameson, a former CIA agent who handled between 30 and 40 defectors during his 22 years with the agency.

"But there is no way round either of those problems. The only thing, it would seem to me — looking at it from the perspective of a great many people in similar situations I have known — is you just have to encourage the man to recognize that these are parts of a reality that is irreversible and that one has to live with.

"Were I the guy trying to deal with him, and aware of the fact that these cancers were gnawing on his guts, I would say, 'There is nothing you can do now to help the situation of your son. Going back won't help, and nothing else will. And since the woman's rejected you, nothing's going to help there, either. These are now aspects of life you are going to have to live with,' " Mr. Jameson said.

The CIA has declined any comment on the Yurchenko case, so it is not known whether this, or a similar psychological approach, was taken.

What is known is that on the night he de-defected, Mr. Yurchenko went with a CIA agent to a Georgetown restaurant not far from the Soviet compound, excused himself from the table and walked into Soviet custody.

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That Mr. Yurchenko was taken to a restaurant so near the Soviet enclave has surprised many members of the intelligence community. But Blanka Ewa Shadrin, a defector's wife, says she and her husband were frequently taken from their McLean, Va., safe-house to a restaurant on the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Calvert Street, near the Soviets' old 16th Street embassy.

Mrs. Shadrin, the Polish wife of Nicholas Shadrin, who was a young captain in the Soviet navy when he fled to the West in 1959, remembers that whenever Mr. Shadrin was taken out alone for dinner during his nine-month-long debriefing, he was accompanied by three agents.

The couple fled together to be free to marry. Her husband became a double-agent for the CIA, until he disappeared in Vienna in 1975. Mr. Yurchenko, during his debriefing, said that the KGB killed Mr. Shadrin. Mrs. Shadrin accepts that as the truth.

Recalling her own sense of isolation during the debriefing period, she said of Mr. Yurchenko, "Maybe he just flipped . . . and altogether he was just human.

"For me, the most important thing, of course, was I was with my husband, and not alone," said Mrs. Shadrin, now a dentist in Virginia. "But being alone, like he was, there is a terrible feeling of isolation. This is an emotional strain. You have to be sorry you did it [defected] because you are so alone."

She added: "I just understand why [Mr. Yurchenko] went home. He was probably not handled right here. We were very lucky. We had nice people around us that were mostly of Russian descent. But other defectors have complained bitterly that they had people who didn't understand them."

William Geimer, president of the privately funded Jamestown Foundation, which helps high-level Soviet defectors to live here, said: "In general, they really go through hell. . . . It is a mixture of homesickness, guilt, fear. It all comes together.

"The handling of these guys is awful. I have never met a defector who didn't complain bitterly [about CIA handling] in private.

"I have talked to about 12 defectors on the Yurchenko case and asked what they think he was. It is nine to three that he is real. The overwhelming feeling is that he is a legitimate defector who ran into emotional problems."

E. Alexandra Costa, the wife of a Soviet diplomat who defected in 1977, told reporters last week that the debriefing process was so dehumanizing that it could contribute to a defector's change of mind.